

Digital Shame as Sexual Governance: Rethinking Sexuality Regulation through Chinese Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

This paper looks at how shame is used to control sexual expression on Chinese social media. It uses ideas from Foucault, Butler, Ahmed and others to study how platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu do not block content directly, but instead use algorithms, user reports and emotional responses to guide what is shown. The paper introduces the idea of “digital shame governance” to explain how shame becomes a tool shaped by both technology and public opinion. It is also used by platforms to make money. Another idea, “click-based sexual discipline,” shows how shame makes certain gender content more visible and popular, even while it limits what women can safely post. By looking at real cases, such as online bullying and feminist voices being silenced, the paper shows how women’s bodies are judged and controlled in these digital spaces. In the end, the study argues that sexual control online is not only about morals or technology, but also about business. Shame is now a kind of data that platforms use to get more attention and profit.

Keywords

Digital shame governance, chinese social media, gender regulation, platform algorithms.

1. Introduction

With the deep integration of social media into people’s daily lives, sex is no longer just a private matter, but has become public content that is viewed, discussed, censored and even commodified. Chinese social media like Douyin often see debates about women’s ‘sexy outfits’ and photos. These posts are quickly hidden or attacked by users [1]. When female creators post sexy clothing videos, dance clips, or body-front photos on social media platforms, they are quickly confronted by platforms that algorithmic downranking, targeted comment attacks, coordinated mass reporting, and eventual account suspension. These behaviors are not episodic moral cleansing or simple gender bias, but rather constitute a compound emotional-technological-moral mechanism institutionalized by platform algorithms, actively participated in by users, and structurally exploited by capital. Shame plays a central role in this: it is not only a means of punishing the expression of the female body, but also a key mediator in maintaining the platform’s moral legitimacy and web traffic efficiency. This phenomenon suggests that sexual expression on contemporary Chinese social media platforms is subject to a highly technological, emotional and capitalized form of governance, which we might call “digital shame governance”.

In Western social theory, Michel Foucault (1978) challenges the repressive hypothesis by arguing that modern power operates not through the suppression of sexuality, but through institutional apparatuses (e.g., medicine, education, law) that produce discourses, classify sexual subjects, and regulate bodies [2]. Foucault’s analysis of biopower (1978) reveals sexuality as a key site of normalization, where power operates through the management of life rather than repression. Extending this framework, Butler (1999) theorizes gender as a performative practice-not an innate essence, but a regulatory fiction sustained through the repetitive citation of norms that materialize the body within dominant power structures [3].

Ahmed (2014) uses the idea of "affective economies" to show how shame sticks to marginalized groups [4]. She explains that emotions spread in ways that keep unfair social systems in place. Platform algorithms operationalize these theories. Gillespie (2018) shows that social media platforms use "community guidelines" to sort and control sexual content. These rules often put business needs first, like keeping advertisers happy. At the same time, Zuboff (2019) explains how this connects to "surveillance capitalism"-where companies collect and sell user data for profit, giving them more control over online spaces [5]. In the Chinese context, the role of social platforms extends beyond being a passive reflection of public opinion; they emerge as active agents of sexual governance, shaping norms and producing sexual shame as part of their operational logic. This repositions platforms not just as intermediaries, but as powerful regulators in the contemporary politics of digital sexuality.

This study examines the frequency of shame experiences among women regarding their sexual self-expression on Chinese social media platforms. It focuses on the production and increase of shame as it happens. Shame is not a natural emotional response, but a form of control that is repeatedly triggered and exploited by platform algorithms, user engagement and web traffic mechanisms. It is not only a "moral evaluation" of expression, but also a means for platforms to manage content, guide viewing, and generate web traffic. Theoretically, this paper combines Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in an attempt to develop an analytical framework that responds to the actual logic of the operation of digital platforms. By reviewing relevant social theories and combining them with real-life examples from platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, the article analyses how sexual shame has turned into an element of content that can be counted, recommended, and economized. In this regard, the concepts of "digital shame governance" and "click-based sexual discipline" are proposed to explain how sexual expression is shaped, regulated, and even punished by both technology and public opinion in today's social media environment.

2. From Discipline to Platform: The Evolution and Blind Spots of Sexuality Theories

In understanding how sexual expression is socially governed, the development of social theory has provided a theoretical progression from disciplinary mechanisms to cultural performances to the politics of emotions. Rather than being repressed, sexuality in modern society is actively shaped, categorized, and governed through discourses, institutions, and power-knowledge regimes [2]. Sexuality thus becomes an object that can be observed, intervened in, and standardized, and individuals gradually learn to discipline themselves within the web of power and internalize society's demands for 'normality.' However, this framework of explanation, which is centered on institutional power, does not cover the logic of how digital platforms reclassify and control sexual expression through technological mechanisms that collaborate with users' behavioral and emotional feedback.

Butler builds on Foucault's ideas. She says gender isn't fixed at birth. Instead, people "act out" gender roles by repeating behaviors that fit society's rules. If someone acts outside these rules (like a man wearing a dress), they often face rejection or criticism [3]. In contemporary digital environments, this performative logic has taken a technological turn: whether gender is 'acceptable' is no longer judged from a social perspective and determined by algorithmic systems through quantifiable metrics such as likes, shares, and popularity scores. Platform systems have taken the place of traditional cultural norms and become new judges of what is acceptable. They not only control which gender performances are visible, but also use the web traffic data-like views, likes, and shares-to decide how widely they spread. In this way, platforms build a new kind of digital performance order.

In this process, shame has become a key emotional tool used for control. Shame is not only a personal emotion-it becomes a form of mediated visibility that enforces gendered norms. Ahmed (2014) explains that shame 'sticks' to individuals through the sense of being judged by others, tying them to social norms even in their attempts to resist [4]. On Chinese platforms, women whose posts are labeled as "borderline sexual content" or "vulgar" may face content removal or shadow bans. Yet this punitive framing also produces visibility, as controversy fuels algorithmic promotion [6]. In this sense, shame acts not only as a moral response but as a platform logic-a way to manage visibility through emotional control. Wendy Hesford (2011) describes shame as a "politics of visibility," where it works by showing sexual expressions in ways that make them feel humiliating, to support power and moral rules [7]. Platforms use filters to block sexual posts, but user reports and comments shape what is allowed [1,8]. Sexual expression becomes part of a user-driven control system based on emotion, attention, and visibility.

At the same time, shame has also become part of platform capitalism. It is now a key emotional resource used to control the web traffic and generate profit. In her analysis of "emotional capitalism," Eva Illouz (2007) argues that emotions like shame, anxiety, and sympathy are no longer just personal feelings [9]. Digital platforms can organize, control, and profit from shame. When users debate sexual expression, algorithms quickly notice and spread these discussions. This keeps people engaged longer, boosting ad revenue. Zuboff (2019) explains that in surveillance capitalism, platforms track users' actions, reactions, and emotions. They use this data to predict behavior and increase profits [5]. Shame isn't just about judging content-it's also a tool for making money.

Bucher (2018) argues that recommendation algorithms are inherently political [10]. Far from passively delivering content, they actively curate information flows to serve platform economies, often at the cost of democratic discourse. They are actually more like forms of "conditional power," which are influenced by many kinds of social structures. These algorithms, they are not just there to filter stuff for you. They are deeply involved in shaping how people, or users, understand certain things like sexuality and gender. It's not just a matter of presenting content, it's that they are playing a role in constructing sexual norms. Platforms use specific mechanisms, not just to show content, but to classify things, to label some actions as "normal," or "acceptable," and others as maybe "borderline sexual content" or even "violating the rules." This reclassifies what is seen as acceptable or unacceptable in these digital spaces. And through these processes, they're constantly reshaping the moral boundaries, the lines, of what's deemed appropriate when it comes to sex and gender, particularly in these online spaces, in digital environments, it's happening all the time.

This shows that platforms now use and spread shame on purpose. The rules of sexual expression are no longer based on law or culture, but on clicks, views, and user reports. This is a new type of platform-based sexual control. It works through web traffic rules, algorithm choices, and emotional reactions. Sexual content is not blocked directly, but made less visible through user actions and platform systems. Shame brings traffic, traffic leads to punishment, and punishment causes more shame. This cycle is now a main way platforms shape sexual expression. It shows a new kind of control shaped by technology, feelings, and profit.

3. Digital Shame in Practice: Governing Sexual Expression on Chinese Platforms

Chinese digital platforms control sexual content through a clever system that combines technology, user behavior, and money-making strategies. The platforms use computer filters to automatically block some sexual posts, but the real control comes from how users react. When people report or comment on sexual content (even negatively), the system notices and often

shows these posts to more people instead of removing them. This happens because controversial content generates more attention and engagement, which helps platforms earn more money from advertisements. What's interesting is that shame becomes part of the control system. Users believe they're freely expressing their opinions about what's appropriate, but actually their reactions help the platform in three ways: deciding which sexual content stays visible, making more profit, and slowly changing what everyone considers "normal" sexual expression. While the system appears to let users decide, it really gives platforms hidden control over sexual content while making them money.

In China's digital ecosystem, the regulation of sexual expression operates through an intersecting framework of platform governance, user participation, and economic incentives—collectively producing a structure that systematically generates shame. This mechanism functions not only through technical content filtering and visibility controls but also via the dynamic interplay between user sentiment and platform engagement systems, which continuously shape and reshape permissible sexual expression. Within this system, shame transforms from an individual emotional response into an institutionalized tool of control. While appearing as a decentralized, user-driven process, this model enables platforms to reconstruct sexual norms through calculated design—turning public shaming into an invisible yet powerful regulatory force.

Chinese platforms regulate sexual content through a dynamic interplay of algorithms, user reactions, and profit incentives. Automated filters set baseline rules, but content visibility is ultimately shaped by viral engagement—controversial posts gain traction through public scrutiny, allowing platforms to monetize “moral policing.” Shame evolves from personal feeling to systemic tool. Platforms encourage user participation in moderation (via reporting features, trending lists) while algorithmically promoting boundary-pushing content. This creates a self-sustaining cycle: public condemnation drives visibility, which in turn fuels revenue. The result is a paradox: seemingly organic content moderation that covertly reinforces platform control. By rewarding controversial sexual expression with attention, these systems redefine norms while turning shame into an engine for profit.

Chinese social platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu enforce unequal standards through their content systems. Women face stricter moderation: yoga pants on Douyin get flagged as “borderline sexual content,” while similar male videos trend freely. Xiaohongshu removes posts of women’s underarm hair but promotes shirtless men. This bias became stark during the 2013 Haitang Bay scandal. When model Sun Jingya faced false escort allegations, platforms failed to stop her private photos from spreading while enabling public shaming. Such cases reveal how technical systems amplify gender discrimination - female bodies get marked as “inappropriate” while male displays get normalized. These rules don't just reflect social biases but actively reshape online gender norms. By controlling what gets seen and rewarded, platforms create a self-reinforcing cycle: controversial female content draws clicks, algorithms boost it as “engaging,” and users unwittingly enforce patriarchal standards through their interactions. This “click-based sexual discipline” turns shame into a tool for profit, fundamentally altering how gender gets policed online.

Even without solid evidence, the platform kept pushing the topic as a trending hashtag, strengthening her sexualized image. Under the name of “moral policing,” this kind of forced visibility not only takes away a woman’s right to speak, but also shows how platforms use algorithmic power to shape the public meaning of female bodies.

Second, in terms of user behavior, shame is no longer only created by the platform itself. Instead, it is now shaped through users' active involvement in moral judgment and public opinion control, forming a kind of shared disciplinary mechanism. On Weibo, a group of users who call themselves “content inspectors” (Jianca Shi) often report female bloggers for wearing “indecent” clothes. These users criticize others’ outfits, poses, and appearances in the name of morality. By

using report systems and comment sections, they gain a sense of moral superiority, while also attracting attention and platform rewards. The comment section-through likes, reposts, and group attacks-helps build a structure of public shaming, where women's bodies are judged through both watching and commenting. Platform governance is not only led by technology. It is deeply shaped by users' moral actions and participation in online discussions. User reporting often appears in the name of "public morality," but in practice, it helps platforms define the boundaries of gender expression and give them a sense of social legitimacy. Feminist groups in China, like Gender Watch Women's Voice, try to avoid state censorship by using careful language. Han (2018) explains that they hide feminist ideas inside words that seem acceptable to the public [11]. This user-led moral practice makes shame a normal and repeatable part of digital life, turning control into a distributed and social process. At the same time, this kind of user behavior gives the platform the appearance of being open and participatory, while covering up how shame is produced and amplified. A powerful example of this is a cyberbullying case known as Fat Cat. In early 2024, a young man jumped into a river after posting messages online blaming his girlfriend for being "cold and unloving." Before any facts were confirmed, many users blamed the woman, saying she was "emotionally unavailable" or "not gentle enough." On Weibo and Xiaohongshu, tens of thousands of angry comments and harsh judgments were posted. Again, a woman became the main target of public shame, positioned as someone who should feel guilty and apologize. Even after later reports revealed that much of the story was misleading, the platform did little to stop the spread. Instead, it promoted the topic through trending lists and pinned comments, pushing the shame further. The case shows how moral emotions like anger and blame are turned into traffic by platform algorithms. In the digital space, feminist voices and misogynist speech often exist side by side. Banet-Weiser (2018) points out how feminist expression online is often met with misogynistic pushback, both amplified by platforms [6]. In this context, shame is not just the result of users expressing moral views. It also becomes a powerful entry point for platform profit.

More importantly, shame here is not only part of the platform's control system but also a key part of how the platform makes money. Platforms do not always hide sexual content that causes controversy. In fact, when the algorithm sees that a post has emotional impact or potential to go viral, it often chooses to promote it rather than suppress it. This creates a strategy of "fake suppression, real exposure," where reported or attacked content ends up getting more attention. As a result, user stay time and ad clicks increase. For example, women posting 'sexy' videos on Douyin get reported. Their posts are hidden but later pushed by the algorithm if users argue [12]. On livestream platforms like Huya, even though there are official rules against "borderline sexy" content, controversial female streamers often see their view counts and tips rise. This shows that platforms are not really trying to stop risky content-they are using the emotions around shame to find and guide traffic peaks. On these livestreaming platforms, such streamers often navigate carefully between being "sexy" and avoiding moral criticism. They adjust their clothing and behavior to meet both the audience's expectations and the platform's rules. Women on social media face pressure to perform a curated, "authentic" self-presentation that aligns with gendered expectations, requiring constant emotional labor to navigate visibility and respectability (Marwick and boyd, 2014). It reflects what Berlant (2011) calls a "cruel optimism" - a hope tied to structures that actually limit freedom [13]. As Ye and Krijnen (2024) point out, the female body is not just something to be seen-it has become a tool shaped and used by algorithm-driven economies [14].

This logic becomes even more complex and typical in major public events. In 2023, a group of women publicly accused screenwriter Shi Hang of long-term verbal and physical harassment, sparking a new wave of the MeToo movement in China. Instead of suppressing the discussion, platforms like Weibo and Xiaohongshu promoted the topic through trending lists and hashtag integration, giving it constant visibility. Although the accusations were calm and based on

personal experiences, the comment sections quickly split into two sides: supporters and doubters. The strong opposition between the two groups greatly increased user interaction, creating an ideal cycle of longer user stay, higher web traffic, and better conversion rate. What's more important is that, even when women speak up bravely, the platform often pulls them back into a narrative of "should they be ashamed." This shows that shame is no longer just a moral rule for content review. It has become a tool for precise web traffic control and commercial effectiveness on digital platforms.

Surveillance capitalism does not rely on stopping user behavior. Instead, it uses algorithmic prediction and emotional triggers to keep user activity going and growing [5]. In this system, shame becomes a measurable economic resource, working through an attention cycle of participation, public reaction, and controversy. The platform does not avoid shame-on the contrary, its technical design helps shame spread, grow, and become more visible.

In this kind of governance, shame is no longer just about moral criticism. It is turned by the platform into something measurable-a kind of data point in the platform's economic system. As mentioned earlier, this is not about simple censorship or rejection. Instead, it works through a system based on visibility, emotional engagement, and traffic conversion. Online sexual expression follows a predictable path: push boundaries just enough to create controversy, use the resulting shame to attract views, and repeat. In this system, shame secretly boosts content in algorithms. Even users who participate in shaming unknowingly help platforms control content. This reveals how "digital shame governance" really works - a uniquely Chinese version of what we might term "click-based sexual discipline."

4. From Shame to Discipline: Restructuring Digital Sexual Governance

Research reveals that Chinese social media platforms have moved beyond traditional methods of controlling sexual content. They no longer depend on conventional rules or cultural standards to regulate how people express gender and sexuality online. Instead, they use a mixed system driven by technology, shaped by user emotions, and aimed at platform profit. In this system, shame is not just a feeling-it is used, coded, and turned into a product. It sets the limits of gender expression and reshapes how power works online. Shame is more than a moral filter. It becomes something the algorithm can detect and boost. This is what this paper called "digital shame governance"-a process where platforms guide user reactions to control how bodies and gender are shown, without needing top-down censorship.

First, the main way platforms manage content is through algorithms that sort and control what people can see. But this process often repeats gender bias. As Gillespie (2018) points out, platform rules may seem neutral under the name of "community guidelines," but they are shaped by moral and gender values. On Chinese platforms, tags like "borderline sexual content" or "vulgar" are often used to decide if a post should be limited or removed. These labels are more often applied to women's bodies. Platforms do not just reflect user preferences-they help shape them. Chun (2016) describes how digital systems build habitual views through predictable emotional cycles [15]. This kind of moral sorting is not just a technical step. It is part of how platforms enforce gender norms through design. Platforms don't only follow social rules-they help define what kind of sexual expression is seen as "acceptable."

Second, user emotions play an important role in how shame works on platforms. Platforms want users to feel strong emotions (like anger or excitement). They use comments, share buttons, and show controversial posts to make this happen. When users react and share, platforms can keep them hooked and steer their behavior [8,12]. In the Chinese context, actions like reporting, reposting, and commenting often show strong moral responses toward content that challenges gender norms. Platforms collect and process this emotional data, using it to guide what content gets promoted. This setup makes mass moral attacks part of the platform's

control system. People think they are "fighting for fairness" by reporting others online, but this actually helps platforms collect more data and control users [16]. In this process, shame moves from something controlled by rules to something co-produced by users and algorithms.

More importantly, shame also becomes part of the platform's business model. Media platforms often turn cultural expression into data assets that can be used for profit. Content that causes controversy gets more attention, so algorithms pick it up and recommend it more. In China's digital environment, this system does not always block "rule-breaking" content. Instead, it uses emotional signals to turn such content into trending topics, which bring in more web traffic and ad revenue. In this structure, shame is no longer just a tool to suppress content. It becomes an emotional resource that platforms manage, boost, and profit from.

If the previous sections show how shame is organized, amplified, and used by digital platforms, then this can be seen as a clear example of what this paper calls "click-based sexual discipline." Content that goes against gender norms often gets more attention and debate, which leads to algorithmic promotion. Shame no longer leads to removal-it actually drives visibility. The system has moved beyond simply hiding sexual content. Instead, shame has become integrated into the platform's reward structure. Control operates through attention and profit metrics. In this environment, whether gender expression is deemed "acceptable" depends not on laws or ethics, but on what generates the most clicks, engagement, and emotional reactions.

Digital platforms no longer control sexual content through simple censorship or self-regulation. Instead, they use a mix of algorithms, emotional triggers, and traffic incentives. In this system, shame is more than just a feeling-it becomes a technical tool and a way to make money. Platforms use it to define gender norms, influence user behavior, and increase profits. This marks a big change in online control. Unlike before, when platforms just blocked or hid content, they now use open, interactive, and measurable methods to reshape gender and power dynamics online.

5. Conclusion

This article explores "sexual shame" on Chinese social media, especially how women face challenges when expressing their gender and identity online. From cases of "borderline sexual content" and bans for being "too sexy," to user engagement and algorithm-driven trends, we see that shame isn't just a personal feeling-it's also shaped and used by social media systems. It seems normal in daily platform use, but in reality, it puts strong limits on women's freedom of expression, especially when they show their bodies or express their self-identities.

The article points out that the shame mechanism is not only shaped by platform technology, but also by user behavior and business logic. The reporting systems, comment sections, and recommendation algorithms which seem neutral, actually constitute a "collaborative governance" network, making "moral condemnation" a driving force for web traffic in the digital space. Gender expressions that get people to talk are often being the ones more pushed, watched more, and also appearing more in what's seen on the platform's content space. By going like this, shame is no longer just emotion but becomes a kind of function by the platform-it is keeping the place under control while also making people pay attention at same time.

In this process, women are often placed in a passive position. Their bodies and expressions are constantly being defined by the platform's review mechanism as "whether they are acceptable" and shaped by user opinions as "whether they are appropriate". If people cross a social line-even by accident-they might face shame or online bullying. In this situation, how someone expresses their gender isn't just a personal choice anymore. It becomes a constant response to a complex system shaped by morality, technology, and commercial goals.

To respond to this, the paper introduces two concepts: "digital shame governance" and "click-based sexual discipline", aiming to describe and explain this new form of gender control. These

ideas help us understand how platforms reshape gender norms, and also remind us that digital space is not naturally free-it is structured by systems of power over bodies, gender, and emotion. The existence of this mechanism shows that platform content rules still lack transparency and gender sensitivity. Traffic-driven recommendation systems often unintentionally amplify gender bias. In digital spaces, women continue to face pressure around how they express themselves, along with the risk of stigma. Creating a more equal space for gender expression will require more than platform self-regulation or better algorithm design. It also depends on broader changes in public awareness and the structure of online discourse.

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